

Two under-construction bridge collapses in India kill scores in space of a month

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Forty-six Indian workers, most of them poor migrants, were killed last month in two accidents involving the collapse of bridge-construction equipment.

The second and more deadly of these occurred on the morning of Wednesday, August 23 in the northeastern state of Mizoram, near the town of Sairang located about 20 kilometres northwest of the state capital, Aizawl.

At least 26 poverty-stricken laborers died when a construction-gantry erected to build a section of a railway bridge collapsed shortly after it was put into operation. A construction gantry is a metallic structure that is built during construction and afterwards dismantled. It is used to place bridge segments on to the piers built to support them.

The workers were apparently crushed to death after the gantry-girder collapsed on them. A further three workers were reportedly injured and treated in hospital.

The portion of the bridge where the collapse occurred straddles a deep ravine in a terrain with undulating ground.

The workers killed in the collapse came overwhelmingly from a single district in the neighboring state of West Bengal. In many instances they were their family's sole breadwinners. The grieving widow of Saidur Rahaman told *Outlook* magazine that "she can't take her eyes off a selfie he had sent on the morning of the fateful day." She further explained that on the day of the accident her husband had told "me not to call him due to work pressure. So our two daughters asked him to send a photograph. He sent a selfie with the bridge in the background on Wednesday morning, which will be a lasting memory for us now."

The girder was built by a company named STUP Consultants and approved to commence operation by a committee of noted structural engineering professors and experienced bridge engineers under the leadership of the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in nearby Guwahati.

That the structure collapsed despite this expert oversight indicates that those involved were grossly negligent, incompetent, or allowed themselves to be bullied by company and government officials eager to meet building

deadlines (which often have bonuses or penalties attached to them.)

The Northeast Frontier Railways (NFR) has announced it is striking a 4-member commission to investigate the causes of this entirely preventable tragedy.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's office responded to the migrant workers' deaths with a pro forma tweet. "Pained by the bridge mishap in Mizoram," it declared. "Condolences to those who have lost their loved ones. May the injured recover soon. Rescue operations are underway and all possible assistance is being given to those affected."

It has announced a measly *ex-gratia* Rs 200,000 (\$2,400) payment for the next of kin of the dead from what is known as the "Prime Minister's Fund." The injured are to be given the princely sum of Rs 50,000 (\$600).

The Indian Railway Ministry also announced a further Rs. 1,000,000 (\$9,600) for the dead's families and Rs. 50,000 for the injured. Family members of the deceased, including mothers now compelled to work to feed their children, have demanded that they be provided suitable jobs.

The bridge is part of the state-owned NFR's 51 km. Bhairbi-Sairang New Line Railway Project, which the Modi government has touted as of "national significance," because it will connect remote and strategically important parts of India's northeast to the rest of the country.

The NFR is using all sorts of corrupt private contractors and, as is the case with every project of this sort, workers are paid a pittance and workplace safety is essentially non-existent.

Just three weeks earlier, a very similar accident took place in the western state of Maharashtra. At around 11:30 pm August 1, 20 workers including four engineers were killed after a girder spanning a "high-tech" mobile-gantry crane weighing 700 metric tonnes collapsed while it was being moved to build the next section of a bridge. Villagers residing nearby were the first to rush to the scene to rescue the workers.

The bridge is part of the 700-km long six-lane, fee-charging Samruddhi Expressway connecting Mumbai,

India's financial centre and second most populous urban agglomeration, to Nagpur, the state's third largest city. This incident took place at Sarlambe village which is located about 80 km northwest of Mumbai.

According to the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC), a government entity that is operated like a for-profit private corporation, around 25 workers were standing on the top of the girder while the mobile-gantry crane was being moved to the next section.

Most of the dead were migrant workers from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh and the eastern states of Bihar and West Bengal. The fact that they are compelled to work at midnight performing such dangerous tasks speaks volumes about the utter criminality of the Indian ruling elite.

As is the case with the Mizoram NFR bridge, the Samruddhi Expressway is being built by private contractors whose sole motivation is to meet a deadline so as to preserve their profit margins.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde of the fascistic Shiv Sena party which rules in a coalition with the pro-business Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) condoled the deaths as is the usual ritual of these utterly cynical and corrupt politicians.

He announced a payment of Rs 500,000 (\$4,800) to each family of the deceased and an insulting Rs. 50,000 to the injured. The principal contractor and the various subcontractors it has hired have also promised a Rs. 500,000 payment to the dead's next of kin, and Modi's "Prime Minister's Fund" is to allocate Rs. 200,000 to each of the deceased's families. All told, this means that each family of the 20 killed in the gantry collapse will receive Rs. 1,700,000 (\$20,000), a miserable sum.

The Chief Minister and his deputy, Devendra Fadnis of the BJP, have announced a commission of inquiry. This is a ritualistic exercise.

The Indian ruling class and their political representatives are utterly indifferent to worker safety.

Most construction work in India is performed by day labourers who lack proper footwear (many go barefoot) or helmets, and neither the central nor state governments have moved a finger to insist that building contractors supply them. The embedded video in this article documents the horrendous conditions to which female construction workers, including those who are pregnant, are subjected.

Fatal accidents even on large government infrastructure projects are common if not daily occurrences.

On June 4, a portion of a highway suspension bridge under construction by a private contractor in the eastern state of Bihar collapsed killing one person and injuring at least 4. This was the second collapse of the same bridge during construction. Even today the reason for the first collapse has

not been properly identified.

There were several other such tragedies in the past year. Last October, shortly after it had been refurbished and declared fit for reopening, a 143-year old suspension bridge collapsed in the city of Morbi in the western state of Gujarat, killing at least 141 persons.

All the empty government condolences, meagre compensations and "commissions of enquiries" are meant to divert attention from the real causes that are fueling these unending "accidents"—the subordination of workers' lives and livelihoods to the profit system.

Modi's far-right BJP government has spearheaded the dismantling of an already notoriously weak regime of workplace safety and environmental laws. It has also gutted the labour laws that govern the so-called formal sector (comprised of large-scale enterprises) to promote the further casualization of employment through contracting-out.

The Indian government's statistics on workplace deaths and accidents are next to worthless since there is no rigorous mechanism for collection of data.

The British Safety Council cited a 2016 study performed by the National Institute of Technology Surat and IIT, Delhi. This study estimated 48,000 fatalities in workplaces every year, out of which construction work accounted for at least 11,614 of the fatalities.

Even these numbers are highly understated. The International Labour Organization conservatively estimates that over 1 million workers die worldwide every year due to workplace accidents and also notes that India and China are among the worst contributors.

In so far as the so-called commissions of inquiry ever find anyone responsible for major workplace tragedies, it is petty officials or low-level subcontractors. Left untouched are the top corporate executives, multi-millionaire owners and investors and the politicians in successive Indian and state governments who have created the legal framework whereby the employers can ruthlessly exploit the country's workers without restraint.



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